

I committed my life to Christ when I was in ninth grade in an emotional, mountaintop salvation experience. A year later I turned sixteen and my faith became a very low priority for me. What began then was a long journey that took me away from my faith, then brought me back to my faith in a way that changed (and continues to change) my life. I share this story because this experience taught me so much about faith, God's persistent grace, and the personal significance of my relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith is, I believe, both individual and communal. Each of us needs to accept God's free gift of grace – no one can do that for us. For me, I needed to embrace Jesus' words from John 10:10b, *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*. The Christian life is not about denying yourself now so you can go to heaven later (as I understood it to be when I was younger). It is about embracing God's love and sharing that love with others.

As we strive to live out our faith, I believe our Christian community is vital. Through our faith community we strengthen each other and deepen our relationships with Christ in ways that would be extremely difficult on our own. Together we find strength and truth in the face of a sometimes harsh, evil, and chaotic world. Together and individually, we can explore the Holy Scriptures for guidance. Biblical interpretation is a mysterious and beautiful adventure, one that is difficult alone; but these Holy Scriptures are a uniquely reliable and crucial source of God's truth, calling for our lives, and love for us all.

At the core of my faith is the "Imago Dei," the belief that we are all created in God's image. *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them* (Genesis 1:27). I believe we should embrace this with immense joy, but also humbly – as all are made in the image of God. If we are each equally made in the image of God, then we must truly live-out our calling to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (see Mark 12:31). This aspiration to love our neighbor selflessly (and to love our Lord) is one we cannot achieve of our own volition, we must open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us every day.

The grace of Jesus Christ, the unceasing love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit are the foundation of who I endeavor to be. Admittedly, I live out my faith imperfectly (hence my need for grace). As part of my community of faith, I strive to encourage others on their faith journeys; likewise, this is where I go to find strength and encouragement to remain so disciplined in my own life. I embrace the words from James, *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead* (James 2:17). Faith without works, like love without action, is superficial. I believe we must strive for more than that, for a deeper kind of faith and love. We act in this way not to earn God's favor -- the blood of Christ took care of that -- we act to show our gratitude for God's love, our enthusiasm for our faith, and to share the love of Christ we have undeservedly received.